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ABSTRACT

The first issue of the Educational Policy Reform Research Institute's (EPRRI)publication, "Policy Updates," introduces the Institute and briefly reports on three key elements of accountability. It notes that EPRRI investigates the impact of educational accountability on students with disabilities and on special education. The Institute is conducting research in four core study states: California, Maryland, New York, and Texas. Examination of the first key element of accountability, federal policies supporting accountability, reviews new requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Government Performance Results Act, and Title I of the Leave No Child Behind Act. The following sections considers challenges in designing indicator systems for special education and offers 10 suggestions for choosing indicators. The final section reports findings of an ongoing analysis of 1999-2000 state assessment reports for students with disabilities. It finds that states have not yet fully complied with the IDEA directive concerning reporting of student assessment results and that reporting of alternate assessments is particularly rare. Recommended practices in reporting assessment results of students with disabilities are highlighted. (DB)

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eprri policy updates

Issue one
Spring 2002

Introducing EPRRI
The Educational Policy Reform Research Institute

EPRRI, with funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, investigates the impact of educational accountability reforms on students with disabilities and on special education. EPRRI addresses the research needs of policy-makers and other key stakeholders by identifying critical gaps in current knowledge, seeking promising strategies, and publishing Topical Reviews, Policy Updates, and Issue Briefs. EPPRI is conducting research in four core study states: California; Maryland; New York; and Texas.

The Institute is a joint venture of the Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children and Youth at the University of Maryland, the National Center on Educational Outcomes at the University of Minnesota, and the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative.

EPRRI Reports on Three Key Elements of Accountability

The demand for accountability for student performance is among the most visible and controversial of U.S. educational reforms. This EPRRI Policy Update highlights three important, interrelated elements of accountability for students with disabilities.

1 Current federal requirements and policies that support special education accountability.

2 The challenges of creating special education indicators that can provide essential accountability information.

3 How states are actually reporting assessment results for students with disabilities.

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Public Reporting: A Cornerstone of Accountability

The most basic and visible form of accountability is the public reporting of student test scores and other key education indicators such as graduation rates, drop out rates, and attendance. Coupled with these reports of student data are consequences – both sanctions and remedies – for schools and individual students. In addition, public reporting and accountability can affect whom a school system hires; how it relates to students and parents; and how it manages resources, makes decisions, and ensures compliance with Federal regulations and requirements.

Federal Policies Supporting Accountability

1 *EPRRI's Topical Review Creating Special Education Performance Goals and Indicators includes an overview of the Federal role in special education accountability systems. Here are selections from the overview (a downloadable version of the complete document is available at www.eprri.org/products).*

New IDEA Accountability Requirements

The 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) amendments contain a number of provisions to align federal special education policy with general education accountability reforms.

Specifically, state education agencies must include students with disabilities in local and statewide assessments with accommodations where appropriate, and report the performance of these students with the same frequency and in the same detail used to report non-disabled students' performance levels.

States are also required to develop alternate means of assessment for students who are unable to participate in standard assessments, and the performance of these students must be reported as well.

With these provisions, the law implicitly defines state and local assessments as contributing to a studentis educational opportunities, for which access must be guaranteed. Tying progress to local and statewide assessments, with appropriate accommodations, can ensure that students with disabilities will access the same standards as all other students.

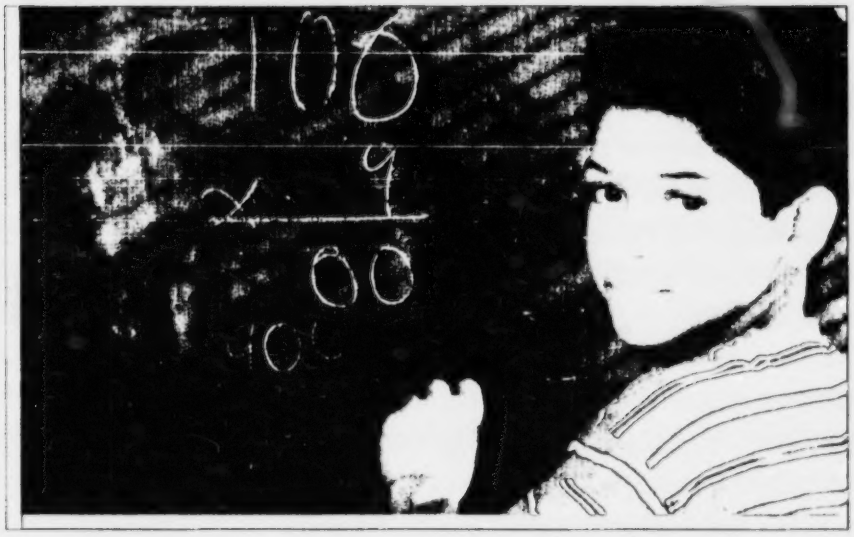
New IDEA Requirements for Performance Goals and Indicators

The 1997 IDEA amendments require that states establish performance goals and indicators for students with disabilities and report to the public on students' progress. The first Biennial Performance Reports for Part B of IDEA, due on December 31, 1999, were to identify the goals and performance indicators states would use to measure students' achievement on goals that, at a minimum, related to assessments, drop out rates, and graduation rates.

A review of these reports indicates significant variation across states. What one state may have distinguished as an indicator, another state identified as a goal. About one-third of the states reported that they applied the same set of goals to students in special education as in general education, while the remaining states had separate sets of goals for each group.

Among all states, the most common goal addressed improving academic achievement, followed by improving transition or post-secondary placements, teacher preparation and technical assistance, graduation rates, dropout rates, and communication or coordination with families and community (Ahearn, 2001).

New Biennial Performance Report guidelines have been issued by Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the second round of these reports are to be submitted by May 31, 2002.



GPRA and Title I

The Government Performance Results Act (GPRA) holds federal agencies accountable for producing results, and links plans and outcomes with budgets. Within the Department of Education, OSEP has developed GPRA goals and indicators.

Title I of the Leave No Child Behind Act, signed into law on January 8, 2002 has sweeping new accountability requirements. Among the accountability requirements are that each state develop and implement a statewide accountability system that ensures that all local school districts, and public elementary and secondary schools make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on annual state assessments in reading and math (science will be added by 2005). As defined by the law, Adequate Yearly Progress applies the same high standards of academic performance to all public school students and measures the progress of public schools and local districts on state academic assessments and at district discretion, any academic or other academic indicators. AYP includes annual measurable objectives for improvement of student performance in each of the following groups of students: all public school students; economically disadvantaged students; students from major racial and ethnic groups; students with disabilities; and students with limited English proficiency.

AYP must also include a timeline for ensuring that each group of students meets or exceeds a state determined "proficient" level of performance on the state assessment. (At a state's discretion, other academic measures such as promotion, high school completion, and completion of college preparatory classes may also be included.)

For a school to make adequate yearly progress, at least 95% of each of the subgroups of students must take the assessments. The law establishes a system of rewards and sanctions for states and local districts to hold public schools accountable for student achievement and making adequate yearly progress (ESEA, Part A, Subpart 1, Sec.1111).

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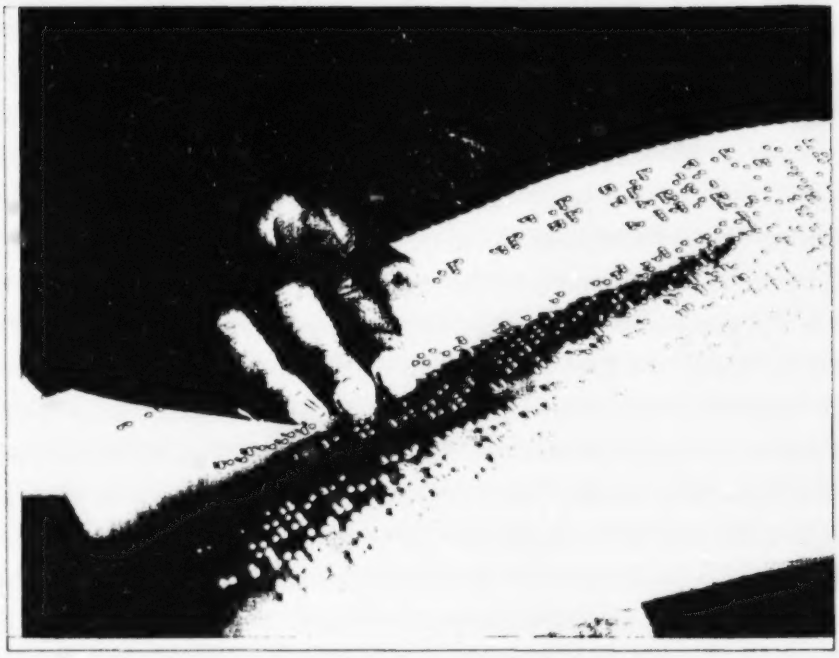
States' Annual Reports to Congress on IDEA Implementation

States' Annual Reports to Congress on IDEA Implementation
Since the implementation of P.L. 94-142, states have been required to report data annually on a variety of program indicators, which currently include the number of students receiving special education services, their placements, the number of personnel serving them, and the exit status of those leaving school. The annual reports, which have been published since 1978, are some of the main sources for information on the nation's progress implementing the IDEA.

The CIMP

The Office of Special Education Program's Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process (CIMP) has been designed to assess "the impact and effectiveness of State and local efforts to provide early intervention services to infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families, and a free appropriate public education to children and youth with disabilities" (OSEP, 2000, p. 3). It employs a multi-step process engaging stakeholder committees at local and state levels to assess critical program needs through the identification of key program indicators. Its focus is on using data to identify improvement areas, and to design and evaluate improvements.



Challenges in Designing Indicator Systems

2 *EPRRI, in collaboration with the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), hosted a Policy Symposium in May 2001 to discuss critical issues in creating a national special education indicator system that could be used for state accountability as well as school and system improvement efforts (proceedings of the symposium are available at www.eprri.org/policysymposia.*

Participants at the Symposium included the special education directors from each of the four core EPRRI study states and a number of local districts. Other important stakeholders such as disability advocates and parents, and representatives from national education organizations and the U.S. Department of Education attended. EPRRI is analyzing various performance data of the core states and local districts as well as reporting formats (available on our website www.eprri.org.

State-level administrators and policymakers identified the following indicators that they believe are for special education accountability and federal oversight:

- Percent earning high school diploma
- Percent dropping out of school
- Participation in post-secondary education or employment

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- Classification and declassification rates disaggregated by ethnicity/race
- Measurement of Least Restrictive Environments
- Number of complaints

Local-level administrators and advocates expressed the need for a broader set of indicators that could be used to target school improvement efforts and keep parents informed about the status of the districts special education program. Local-level participants concluded that:

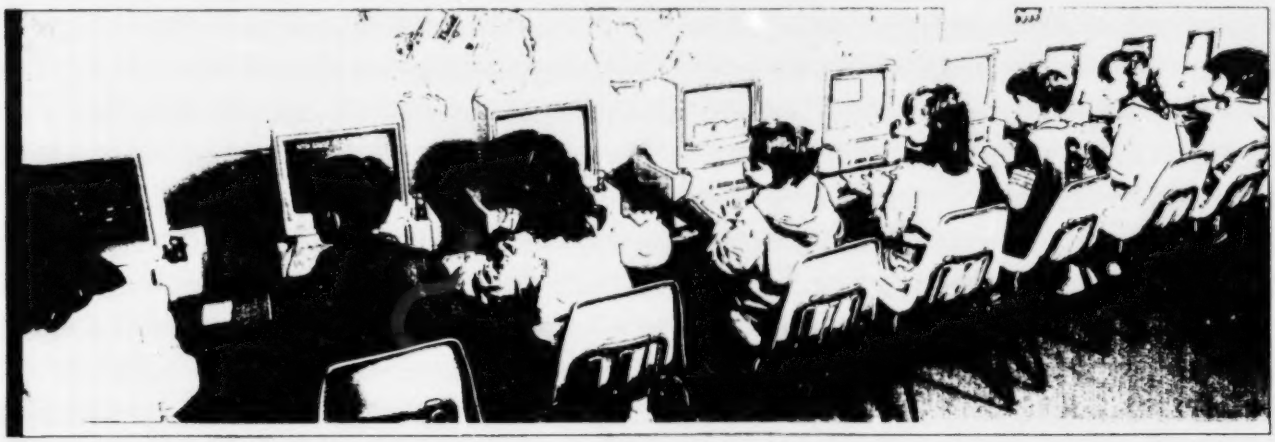
- School level data must be the most comprehensive, because this is the level most sensitive to program improvement efforts.
- Indicators need to reflect the diversity of students with disabilities and their educational environments.
- Student performance indicators should drive the accountability system, including those that measure social/behavioral status of students.
- Important educational process indicators need to be collected, such as evaluations of parent participation, school improvement plans, staff evaluations, collaboration among professionals and alignment of administrative and supervisory structures.
- People in the trenches must understand the relevance of the data the are asked to collect.

Choosing Indicators

Indicators may differ depending on the stakes or consequences of decisions (e.g., resource allocation, capacity building, corrective action) and the level (student, school, district, state, or federal) at which they are made. If consequences, such as further investigation or sanctions, are attached to the data, the stakes increase and the properties of the indicators become even more critical.

We offer here 10 practical considerations for selecting indicators that support valid decision-making:

1. All information is not of equal value. Indicators should be selected on the basis of their relevance to the specific decisions being made.
2. The lower the level of inference required to interpret data associated with an indicator, the more likely it will support valid decisions.
3. Decisions are likely to be more valid when they are based on multiple sources and types of information that converge.
4. Indicators that lack stability (over time, across groups, across settings, etc.) are of limited use for valid decision-making.
5. Information loses value over time. To the extent possible, indicators should be selected that provide information in "real time" to decision-makers.
6. Valid and reliable data, although they may cost more to collect, are needed for valid decision-making.
7. Removing redundancies in data collection creates a more efficient system.
8. Data collection should be coordinated both horizontally, across various programs and offices, and vertically, from school to district to state.
9. Standardizing the operational definitions of specific indicators is important for comparability and coordination.
10. Finally, all those who will use the indicators for decision making should value them. A statistic must have meaning and use, or people will have little incentive to collect and record accurately.



What Are Indicator Systems?

Indicator systems are a key element of accountability, although they are not the whole accountability system. Indicators provide information, which can range from student-level outcomes such as academic achievement, to school-level input such as teacher quality and class size. In an effective accountability system, the information that indicators offer is used to monitor the "health" of the education system, reported to appropriate agencies and the public, and acted upon. Among the indicators that states use most frequently are assessment scores, drop out rates, student attendance, and expenditures.

To learn more about EPRRI and what we are doing, Visit our Web site at: www.eprri.org

How States Report Assessment Results

3

Reporting results for students with disabilities helps ensure that these students are included in accountability systems. However, the form and content of reports vary widely among states and across school districts. The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO's) ongoing analysis of 1999-2000 state assessment reports for students with disabilities indicates:

- States have not yet fully complied with the IDEA directive to report on students with disabilities with the same frequency and detail as for other students;
- Assessment results for many students are still not reported, including data for some students using non-approved accommodations, using alternate assessments, or taking tests designed for lower grade levels;
- Alternate assessments are new, and states face the technical challenge of aggregating these results with regular scores in a way that is statistically sound;
- Only one state, Kentucky, has so far included information on alternate assessments;
- As states track performance results over time, they need to document and account for changes in students' special education status.

Reporting assessment performance data is a critical step in education reform. The next important step is to use the information to improve outcomes and achievement levels for all students.

Recommended Practices for State Reporting of Assessment Results of Students with Disabilities

- Provide data from all test takers, whether they participate with or without accommodations or use an alternate assessment;
- Give the rates of (as well as the reasons for) the exclusion of students with disabilities;
- Keep records of accommodations used;
- Account for students whose scores are not aggregated with others, or who are not in the assessment system in any way;
- Inform parents about the reporting policy for their child's data;
- Create reports that are clear, comprehensive, concise, and readily available;
- Provide comparative information about schools, districts, states, regions, or standards, including changes over time;
- Maintain confidentiality and offer cautions against misinterpretation.

Source: Nelson, Ysseldyke, & Thurlow, 1998; Ysseldyke & Nelson, 1998

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EPRRI's Core Study States

We conduct research in collaboration with four states and eight local school districts:

CALIFORNIA
- Long Beach Unified School District
- New Haven Unified School District

MARYLAND
- Carroll County Public Schools
- Montgomery County Public Schools

NEW YORK
- North Colonie Central School District
- Rochester City School District

TEXAS
- Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School Distrcit
- Garland Independent School District

For More on These Policy Update Topics...

Read EPRRI's Topical Reviews Creating Special Education Performance Goals and Indicators and Reporting on the State Assessment Performance of Students with Disabilities, available on www.eprri.org/products. You can also read about EPRRI's Policy Symposia at www.eprri.org/policysymposia.

Who is involved

EPRRI is a project of the Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children and Youth at the University of Maryland, in collaboration with the National Center on Educational Outcomes and the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative.

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U.S. Office of Special Education Programs

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is committed to positive results for children with disabilities. The Institute is an IDEAs that Work project.

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